



# Profile: William Green

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BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Compassion and generosity are more than mere virtues to William Green. They are natural extensions of his character that tend to emerge when he sees people or situations in need of assistance.

For the better part of 28 years, the founding partner of Delfino Green & Green in San Rafael has employed those traits to correct wrongs and help individuals who have suffered physical and emotional injuries. It's more than just a job or career to Green – it's a calling that has positioned him to do what he set out to do when he chose law.

“I really wanted to be able to make a difference in people's lives,” he said. “I wasn't going to be a doctor – that just wasn't part of my skill set. So it seemed the best thing for me was to do something where I was able to help the greatest number of people. And I wanted to help people who were going through probably one of the worst times of their lives.

“When you get into some sort of catastrophic situation or some sort of serious accident occurs, it's pretty much a low point in people's lives,” Green continued. “If you can help them dig out of that, help them make it a little bit better, you feel good when you put your head down on the pillow that night.”

Indeed, the gratification that comes with a favorable result is a given. With it comes not only a happy and compensated client, but compensation for the attorney as well. Yet Green has been known to take his duties beyond contingency-based representation, providing legal services without any expectation of getting paid.

“A client came in recently and asked me, ‘What is it that you like most about what you do?’ And I said my most gratifying



Green

experiences are the cases where I represent people and I'm personally getting nothing out of it,” Green explained.

“I've got one case I've been involved with for about a year and a half, and I'm

not getting paid a dime, and I don't ever expect to – and honestly don't really want to,” he continued. “It was just a person who needed help; she was representing herself against several lawyers who were just bullying her. ... I feel great that I was able to make a positive change in the case and do something for somebody without getting anything out of it. With a case like that, you know you're feeling good about what you're doing and not about getting a payday at the end of it.”

Green has had his share of paydays over the years while championing the rights of those injured or disabled and holding government entities and large corporations liable for wrongdoing. Like many plaintiffs' lawyers these days, most of his cases don't make it to trial and instead end in out-of-court settlements or arbitrations.

“It really has to be a perfect storm of bad things happening in a case for it to go to trial,” Green contended. “Somebody has to have really misvaluated their case, and it does happen occasionally. And sometimes there are just cases where there's a good-faith disagreement about how it should come out.”

## Going all in

Green said his belief in each of his cases is a sure-fire signal to the opposition that he's 100 percent confident he'll prevail. And that's usually enough to persuade them into a satisfactory settlement. “I believe in them so much that I'm willing to put myself and a lot of times my own funds at risk to try them,” he said. “So when you're willing to do that, you almost always settle them because the other side knows you're prepared.

“Trial is one of those mixed blessings,” Green added. “It's incredibly interesting and fun and exciting and exhilarating. And it's also incredibly stressful and difficult, and it certainly takes its toll on the litigants and the lawyers.”

On the occasions he does make it to trial, Green believes it is critical to establish a connection with jurors; not only a personal connection but also – and far more important – a definitive link between his client and those strangers who hold the fate of the case in their hands. A good trial lawyer will make the panel understand what his client has gone through and what it's going to take for those 12 decision-makers to make his client's life better, he contends. And because most cases that go to trial are close calls from the outset, it may just boil down to who the jurors can relate to best.

That relationship, Green said, starts during voir dire. “During the jury war, there are a lot of people walking through that in robot-like fashion, asking questions and such,” he said. “My technique is a lot different. I want to get as close as the judge will allow me to get to the jury box; I want to look into their eyes, and I want to get a sense of what I think of them, sort of like reading the tells that people have about how they're feeling



about you, about the subject matter of your case, about your client ... things that might give you some clues into how they might be leaning.

“The bottom line is that it’s your only chance as a trial lawyer to talk directly to those folks,” he added. “So you have to be really good at establishing that connection early and in a pretty solid fashion.”

### The Natural

Green grew up in Southern California, where his father worked in the entertainment business and made a modest living. From a young age, Green had a knack for being a mediator of sorts when family members got into heated debates, which happened rather frequently, he said. He was always the one there to smooth things over and try to set things right.

One of his early role models was his older sister, who is six years his senior. Her entry into the law profession gave him a bit of a preview of college life, law school and the bar, and he got to see how interesting and rewarding that journey was for her – and could be for him.

At around the same time, Green had the good fortune to bear witness to a litigation involving his father down in Southern California. Part of what his father did late in his career was to bring business parties together in the entertainment industry, and after one such transaction, a dispute ensued over a proper fee, Green explained. So his dad retained an attorney.

“I got to watch the whole thing, the entire trial,” Green recalled. “It was fascinating. There was intense mental preparation, and I saw how much of a physical toll it took on everyone. But at the end, it was a very rewarding experience. My dad’s lawyer won the case, and it was kind of inspiring. I didn’t know it would have such a big effect on me at the time. It wasn’t until about five or six years later that I started to realize it.”

After graduating from UC Hastings College of Law with honors and passing

the bar, Green went to work at a defense firm and quickly concluded it was not his cup of tea. “I just didn’t feel good about what I was doing – I didn’t feel good about myself at the end of the day,” he recalled. “Not that you couldn’t have a positive effect on people’s lives as a defense lawyer. But I always felt ... I was much more aligned with the people on the other side of the cases from me.”

He then took a position with a big plaintiffs’ firm, where he represented large corporations in bad-faith insurance cases relating to environmental contamination. Again, it was not quite the kind of work he had envisioned.

“It wasn’t until I started helping individuals – when I started doing insurance bad-faith cases for people who had lost everything, like those in the Oakland Hills fire – that I started really feeling good about what I was doing,” Green said. “Then I started slowly but surely getting into some serious injury-type cases and helping people who had been involved in catastrophic injury situations. That’s when I finally started to feel like I’d found what I was meant to do.”

### Being true to himself

Oftentimes, choosing not to help someone is the toughest part of Green’s job. When a case presents itself, Green always asks himself whether he’s prepared to take it all the way to a judge or jury or arbitrator. Part of answering that crucial question is believing – or at least feeling – that he is on the side of right. “I’ve sometimes had to bow out of cases where midway through I had to say, ‘Look, I think there are serious problems with the case, and I don’t want you, my client, to have somebody who thinks there are serious problems with the case.’ I really have to believe in it,” Green explained. “I don’t think lawyers get very far faking it or making an argument that doesn’t hold water.”

When Green is away from work, he tries to stay fit and blow off steam playing tennis, a sport he played competitively as

a youth. But perhaps his biggest leisure activity is flying. About 15 years ago, he took his first flying lesson, and today he is a licensed pilot and instrument-rated pilot. At first, it was merely a hobby that satisfied his adventurous side, he said. Then his instincts kicked in: He found a way to apply his new skill to aid others through a charitable organization called Angel Flights. The nonprofit selects pilots to go pick up seriously ill patients who live in remote areas and take them to their medical appointments at UCSF or Stanford or other urban hospitals.

“For instance, I’ll go up to Arcata and pick somebody up who has some rare form of cancer and then bring them to one of the great medical centers down here,” Green explained.

“Sometimes I take them back; sometimes it will be another pilot. ... I really enjoy it because I’m not just up there having a huge carbon footprint, burning fossil fuel. I’m doing something for someone. And again, I feel kind of selfish when I do it because I get an incredible amount of thanks and appreciation from the people I do it for. But it’s wonderful.”

As for the wonderful place he’s found within his profession, Green could only say he had to look around a bit – test the waters, as it were – to reach what he dubbed his “pinnacle.” So if he had to advise today’s aspiring lawyers, he would tell them not to worry about having a plan, but don’t let yourself get bogged down in a bad place.

“If you’ve got something you already know you want to do with the law, like if you’ve always wanted to be in mergers and acquisitions or you’ve always wanted to advise corporations or you’ve always wanted to do criminal defense – great, do that,” he said. “But don’t worry if there isn’t anything you’ve sort of preselected. Because there’s so much you can do once you have your law degree.”

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